



SPEAKING OF DOGS

Seminars, Outreach & Rescue

Hoarding

Dictionary.com's thesaurus describes 'hoarding' as: accumulate, amass, collect, hide, keep, save, scrimp, sock away, stockpile, treasure.

Depending on the individual, hoarding can encompass a wide variety of items from books, clothing, newspapers, cans of food, junk mail, pill bottles and rocks to old shopping lists, animals and everything in between.

From the NeuroBehavioral Institute "Hoarding is estimated to affect between 700,000 to 1.4 million people in the US. This may be an underestimate as many hoarders often do not seek help on their own. It is most common for hoarders to be brought to treatment by a loved one. Hoarding is quite a common symptom among people with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Anywhere from 25 to 30 % of people with OCD report hoarding symptoms. Compulsive hoarding does not discriminate. It can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, or socio-economic status. Although hoarding is commonly thought of to occur in the elderly, hoarding symptoms actually begin between age 11 or 12 on average. As with many other conditions, hoarding, if left untreated, will become more severe over time. It is also important to consider that all hoarders are not the same. Hoarding symptoms vary in severity from mild to severe".

To target animal hoarding specifically, a research study was done from 1997-2006 by the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium at Tufts University to increase awareness about this complex disorder which had until recently not received serious attention by medical, mental health, and public health professionals. Known to animal protection groups and SPCA's for many years as "collectors", the depth of this issue is just beginning to be uncovered, and shows striking similarities to other forms of hoarding behaviour which are better understood.

According to Dr. Gary Patronek, founder of the above study, animal hoarding is a serious mental health issue that involves an individual or individuals acquiring more animals than they can care for and can be defined by the following criteria:

- More than the typical number of companion animals
- Inability to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter, and veterinary care, with this neglect often resulting in starvation, illness, and death

- Denial of the inability to provide this minimum care and the impact of that failure on the animals, the household, and human occupants of the dwelling

The research study narrowed the field to three “types” of animal hoarders:

1. Overwhelmed Caregiver Hoarder – are more based in reality, become overwhelmed by the number of animals that they take in
2. Rescuer Hoarder – mission driven, they are actively and compulsively acquiring animals
3. Exploiter Hoarder – feel no empathy towards animals or humans, acquire animals to serve their own needs

Excerpts from www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/index

- hoarders justify their behaviour with the view that the animals are surrogate children and that no one else can care for them.

- in a typical hoarding situation, the hoarder will put their own needs to be surrounded by animals ahead of providing even the most basic care. Although professing great love for the animals, they are often oblivious to serious illness, animals in desperate need of veterinary care, starvation, and even death of the animals.

- few if any animals are ever adopted or placed, and new animals are never turned away, even in the face of rapidly deteriorating conditions. There are often substantial efforts to acquire even more pets. Some hoarders acquire the animals passively because they are "known" as a shelter or good samaritan. Others can go to great lengths, often pursuing extremely clever subterfuge to infiltrate legitimate rescue groups, shelters, veterinary clinics, etc.

- there have been cases where very well done internet sites advertising themselves as a "No-Kill" sanctuary taking special needs pets was a front for hoarding. Unfortunately, owners desperate to place an unwanted pet may not ask too many questions, even when the solution sounds too good to be true.

- the stereotype of an animal hoarder is that of a single, older woman, living alone and socioeconomically disadvantaged. Like any stereotype, there is some support in existing data. However, it is important to recognize that hoarding knows no age, gender, or socioeconomic boundaries. It has been observed in men and women, young and old, married as well as never married or widowed, and in people with professional jobs.

- hoarders often manage to live a double life, deceiving friends and co-workers about the true conditions at home

- Almost every conceivable type of animal can be a victim of hoarding. Reports have documented a wide range of companion animals such as cats, dogs, rabbits, ferrets, birds, and guinea pigs, to farm animals (horses, sheep, goats, chickens, cattle), to exotic and sometimes dangerous wildlife.

- Domestic species are the largest group of animals represented in hoarding cases, most likely because of availability and relative ease of care. Cats are very common and contribute to the stereotype. They are easily available in any community and easier to conceal than dogs. This ease of availability and concealment could explain the high frequency of cat hoarding compared to some other species.

Ontario SPCA Senior Inspector Connier Malory writes:

“Animal hoarding occurs in communities across the province. A complex disorder, it affects both human and animal welfare, is responsible for substantial animal suffering and property damage, and is frequently misunderstood and under-recognized. Thousands of animals in Ontario are affected each year, yet due to the nature of animal hoarding, countless cases remain undetected and unreported. Animal hoarding should not be confused with legitimate efforts to assist animals, including animal sheltering, sanctuary and rescue. The difference between a person who keeps an unusually large number of pets and cares for them properly, and the animal hoarder, is that the hoarder is typically in denial about their inability to provide proper food, water, sanitation and veterinary care”

Senior Inspector Mindy Hall oversees investigators and agents across the GTA and has been with the Ontario SPCA for 20 years. She says she’s seen an increase in hoarding and it is not uncommon to investigate at least a dozen cases annually in the Toronto area alone. Mindy says that “although cats are the most common species hoarded, I have also seen cases involving dogs, rabbits and horses. Animals in these situations, especially cats, are typically feral. Living conditions within the homes are not suitable for animals or humans due to feces, urine, garbage and the overwhelming odour”. She adds that “in some cases owners also hoard other items which further clutter the home making it difficult to maneuver within. In all cases I have been involved with medical conditions in the animals are left untreated causing pain and/or suffering. In most cases, the owner denies there is anything wrong with the animals or that they can treat them themselves without a veterinarian, sometimes using inappropriate products or methods. In some many instances no one is aware of the hoarding situation until a medical emergency arises or the death of the owner occurs.”

She offers the following tips on identifying a potential animal hoarder:

- often a recluse who views the world as a hostile place for animals and people – suspicious of law enforcement and isolates from family members

- covered windows, overgrown vegetation, gates, fences, no trespassing signs
- household conditions often deteriorate to the point where appliances and utilities are not functioning and proper food preparation and basic sanitation measures become impossible
- may be rodent or insect infested with dangerously high concentrations of ammonia odour coming from the house

She states that animal hoarding is much more than an animal issue. Dealing with animal hoarders requires collaboration and exchange of information between agencies and integrated community response – mental health services, animal protection services, public health, building inspectors, police services and veterinarians.

With the OSPCA act being revised and regulations added that include standards of care for animals, the society is now able to address these situations most effectively and efficiently. Where charges are laid under the act the courts may now order the following:

If a person is convicted of an offence under clause (1) (b) or (c) contravenes subsection 11.2 (1) causing distress, (2) permitting distress (3) training, permitting animals to fight, (4) owning animal fighting equipment, structures (5) harming a law enforcement animal the court making the conviction may, in addition to any other penalty, make any other order that the court considers appropriate, including an order that the convicted person undergo counseling or training.

(1)(b) Contravenes or fails to comply with section 11.1 - standards of care

(1)(c) contravenes subsection 11.2 (1) causing distress, (2) permitting distress (3) training, permitting animals to fight, (4) owning animal fighting equipment, structures (5) harming a law enforcement animal

Most offenders deny family and friends access to their home. Consequently, family and friends will unknowingly enable hoarders to continue by providing them with food or money. Family and community members can help hoarders get the assistance they need, while protecting animals, by notifying the Ontario SPCA or local police if they suspect someone is hoarding animals. In addition, anyone who is considering relinquishing an animal to an individual or private animal organization should visit the property first and ask to see how and where the animals are kept.